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ABSTRACT

Two English-speaking six-year-olds attending a French-speaking kindergarten in Montreal were tested for the content of their French L2 (second language) utterances. An adaptation of the mean length of utterance (MLU) index was used to judge the order of acquisition in the encoding of semantic-syntactic relations in the second language. The same categories of relations which accounted for 75% of the early sentences of English and French L1 learners accounted for 65-70% of the early sentences of the French L2 learners. Like the former, the latter named things, talked about people acting upon objects, talked about the recurrence and disappearance of objects, and called the attention of others to what they saw, heard, and did. However, while L1 learners begin by encoding a few relations and then add new ones, the two L2 learners encoded a large number of relations in their earliest sentences, and showed no pattern of emergence of new relations. The frequency with which various relations were expressed depended less on what the L2 learners knew how to say than on what they wanted to say. Further, some relations were more frequent in the speech of the L2 learners then in that of L1 learners, including attributive and naming relations. Finally, the language of the L2 learners was characterized by frequent use of pro-forms. (JB)

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French L2 Learners: What They're Talking About

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This research report is based on part of a continuing longitudinal study involving children in Montreal learning French as a second language. The development of the encoding of certain semantic relations in their speech is described, and aspects of this second language (L2) development are compared with relevant first language (L1) development research.

The French L2 subjects of the study are native speakers of English who are learning French in what has been called a "submersion" situation. That is, unlike children in the French "immersion" programs, in which a group of English-speaking children in an English-language school have a French-speaking teacher (see Dumas, Selinker, and Swain, 1973; Lambert and Tucker, 1972), children in a "submersion" situation are in classes where all or almost all the other children and the teacher are French-speakers. However, the subjects in this study were not really in a typical Montreal French-language school. Their school had both French classes and English classes, whereas most schools in Montreal have either French or English classes, but not both.

Kenny and Greg, the two children whose L2 acquisition is described in this report, were six years old during the period of the study reported here. The study was based on the analysis of spontaneous speech samples, tape-recorded during informal play sessions in the children's homes. During the

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play sessions, each child (or, on two occasions, Kenny and Greg together) interacted with an adult native speaker of French.[1]

The data base for the part of the study to be discussed here consists of speech samples of one hour in length which were recorded approximately monthly over a period of six months. There were approximately 3,300 utterances in the combined corpus for these two children. There were seven samples of Kenny's speech and four of Greg's.

At the time of the first samples of speech to be considered in this report, the children had been in a French kindergarten for about three months. During the previous school year they had attended a so-called "bilingual" nursery school where they had heard both French and English from their teachers and the other children. At the end of that year, they rarely spoke French, even in the nursery school class. Both the kindergarten and nursery school programs were 2 1/2 hour-a-day programs. Outside of school, Kenny and Greg did not often play with French-speaking children. Thus, their exposure to French had been relatively limited in terms of hours, and they had never been "taught French" in any systematic way.

The analysis of the two children's speech was based on a framework developed in L1 research. Utterances sharing certain features of form and meaning were grouped into categories of semantic-syntactic relations.

Categories of Semantic-Syntactic Relations: L1

In L1 research a concensus has developed concerning the semantic relations which are most frequent in the early sentences produced by L1 learners. Children whose mean length of utterance (MLU) is less than

[1] Louise Tétreault was the research assistant throughout the study. She recorded and transcribed the tapes which provided the data for analysis. At the time of the study she was a student at the Université de Montréal. She is now a teacher of French in a Montreal school.

2.0 talk about a rather limited number of things, combining two words at a time to express these meanings. Some of their earliest sentences refer to the names of objects or simply express the fact of their existence:

EXISTENCE (Naming)	a lamb[1]	c'est papa[1]
	this necklace	une dame
	that's a mouse	un chien

Children also comment on or request the recurrence of objects and events:

RECURRENCE	more cookie	encore couteau
	more clown	encore boire thé
	more write	un autre joujou
	do again	
	'nother one	

They talk about the disappearance or absence of objects and the cessation of events, and they reject objects and events:

NEGATION	no monkey	marche pas
	no fit	pas dodo bébé
	no pocket	pas la cube
	no zip	

They talk about people doing things and about people doing things to objects:

ACTION	Mommy push	manger tout
	open drawer	moi pousser
	tear it	papa tape mur
	Kathryn jumps	la poupée myammyam

[1] Examples in English are from Bloom, Lightbown and Hood (1975). Examples in French are from Lightbown (1977). Errors in inflections and gender errors in the French examples are shown as the children produced them.

They talk about changes in the location of people and objects:

	put in box	mettre l'eau bib eron
LOCATIVE ACTION	you put	[a] mis [a] chambre
	tape there	la fleur ici
	sweater chair	aller là-bas

And, they talk about static location:

	baby basket	Monsieur là-dedans
LOCATIVE STATE	Mommy bathroom	lunettes tête
	bees in there	est là

They refer to ownership or apparent possession of objects:

Grandma flower	maison Sébastien
Kathryn sock	bébé à moi
my pen	le pantalon à poupée
my paper	

They refer to objects and people and animals in terms of their size, shape, number, and other attributes:

	two airplanes	beaucoup coussins
ATTRIBUTION	dirty sock	tracteur vert
	tiny balls	est gros
	sharp pin	

They also call the attention of their interlocutors to what they see or hear:

	watch it	regarde bébé
NOTICE	ə hear childrens!	regarde ça
	look ə man	

The encoding of these semantic relations has been observed and described in the speech of children with MLU of less than 2.0.[1] Slightly later in their linguistic development, when MLU is still around 2.5, other relations are added, including information questions:

	what this?	Qu'est-ce que c'est ça?
WH-QUESTION	what's in that?	Où il est gâteau?
	where man go?	
	where other sock?	

As MLU passes 2.5, children's utterances still encode these relations, of course, but new semantic relations are added, for example, instrumental relations (eat with spoon), adverbials of time and manner (now do this; do it like this), conjunction (a red one and a blue one), etc. As their sentences become longer, more than one semantic relation is encoded in each sentence, whereas in the earlier period each two-word sentence encoded a single relation.

The categories of semantic-syntactic relations described above have been identified in English L1 acquisition data (Bloom, Hood, and Lightbown, 1974; Bloom, Lightbown, and Hood, 1975). They have also been identified in French L1 acquisition data (Lightbown, 1977).

Other researchers have classified utterances in terms of similar but not identical categories of semantic relations. Some researchers have found it more revealing, for example, to separate agent-action, action-object, and agent-object relations rather than to group them under a single category of action relations (Bowerman, 1973; Braine, 1976; Brown, 1973). Nevertheless, there is agreement that, in L1 acquisition, children begin by encoding a small number of relations and gradually add to the number of

[1] Other, less frequent, relations have also been observed. Only those which were most frequent have been included here.

relations they can encode. The earliest semantic relations are similar among children learning different languages as L1. The short list of relations given above accounts for approximately 75% of the multi-word utterances in the spontaneous speech of children with MLU less than 2.0 (Bloom, Lightbown, and Hood, 1975; Brown, 1973; Lightbown, 1977; Slobin, 1970).

Not only do these categories of semantic-syntactic relations describe the children's speech over all, they also appear to develop in a similar sequence. Certain functional relations (naming, recurrence and certain kinds of negation) have the highest proportional frequency in the earliest two-word sentences. Action verb relations (action and locative action) then increase in frequency until they are more frequent than the functional relations. Stative verb relations (locative state, notice) emerge after action relations and tend to have lower frequency over time. Attributive and possessive relations have been found variable among children, appearing among the earliest two-word utterances of some children and later in the speech of others. The productive encoding of other relations such as dative, instrument, and wh-question has been observed to develop after the above relations were well-established.

It should be emphasized that it is <u>productive use</u> which is at issue, the creation of new sentences in sufficient numbers that one may be sure that the child is not simply parrotting memorized routines. For example, most children have a wh-question form which permits them to ask the names of objects well before they combine words in two-word utterances. These early forms, however, are apparently stereotypes, utterances whose components have not been analyzed and recombined by the child.

The order of emergence of the encoding of semantic relations in L1 speech has been accounted for in terms of several factors. Clearly, the status of children's <u>cognitive development</u> can be cited as a partial

explanation for the early encoding of existence, recurrence, and action relations, for example. The frequency with which these relations are encoded in the speech which adults address to young children can also be cited as contributing to the sequence of acquisition of utterances encoding certain semantic relations. Linguistic complexity, the relative difficulty of getting from understanding an idea to constructing a sentence to encode it, also plays a role (Bloom, Lightbown and Hood, 1975; Brown, 1973; Slobin, 1970).

It does not appear to be possible to account for children's acquisition of certain semantic-syntactic relations by appealing to one of these explanations (cognitive development, frequency, linguistic complexity) alone. For example, the fact that dative relations--giving or showing something to someone--are not encoded among the earliest utterances cannot be accounted for on the basis that the child does not yet understand such relationships cognitively. Giving and taking are among the favorite activities of one-year old children before they use any words. Linguistic complexity appears to play a role in the later emergence of dative relations. (See Cook, 1976, and Cromer, 1975, for studies of children's continuing difficulties with the linguistic structure of dative relations.)

On the other hand, attributive relations appear to be linguistically simple, like the earlier functional relations. An attributive word can act as a kind of pivot, combining with many different nouns. Thus, difficulty of learning attributive relations may be due to cognitive complexity. The L1 learner with MLU less than 2.0 has not yet achieved the level of cognitive maturity which would permit him to organize things in terms of size, color, shape, and quantity.

The frequency with which an adult talking to a child names things and asks the child if he has or wants "more" is certainly very high. This may partly explain the early emergence of existence and recurrence relations.

However, the frequency with which adults refer to things in terms of their attributes is also high, as is the frequency of utterances with the form of wh-questions. Thus, frequency in the input is not a sufficient condition for predicting early acquisition of the encoding of a particular semantic relation.

Thus, the sequence of acquisition of utterances which encode various semantic relations must be explained in terms of interactions among cognitive and linguistic complexity as well as frequency of occurrence of model utterances in the L1 learner's environment.

What order of acquisition would one expect to find in the encoding of these semantic relations in the speech of L2 learners?

Comparing Language Learners: Indices of Linguistic Development

Before presenting and discussing the results of the analysis of L2 speech in this study, I would like to discuss briefly the problems of determining how to compare the linguistic development of L1 and L2 learners. Indeed, as Larsen-Freeman (1976) and others have pointed out, it is very difficult to know how to compare L2 learners with each other. To try to compare them to L1 learners is even more complicated.

In the present study, a number of indices of linguistic development were applied to the data. Measures of vocabulary and volubility, type-token ratios to measure variety of use, as well as mean length of utterance (MLU) were used. Other possible indices are currently being considered and it is hoped that some index will be developed which will permit comparisons among learners to be made in a less ad hoc manner.

For the young L2 learners in this study, an adaptation of the MLU index proved to be the best index, best, in the sense that it was the most reliable of the indices--the one least susceptible to change according to

situational non-linguistic factors. This MLU value was computed according to Bloom's (1970) adaptation of Brown's (1973) original rules, with a further adaptation which deleted from the corpus the single word utterances "oui" and "non" as well as numbers chanted in series. The MLU values for Kenny and Greg ranged from 2.0 to 3.3 during the period of the study. Thus, in terms of MLU, they were in advance of the L1 learners with whom they were compared. However, there was evidence that this was partly due to the fact that a number of only partially analyzed phrases which were frequent in their speech inflated MLU values (see Lightbown, 1977).

Categories of Semantic-Syntactic Relations: L2

The same categories of semantic-syntactic relations which accounted for 75% or more of the early sentences of English L1 and French L1 learners accounted for about 65-70% of the early sentences of the French L2 learners. Like the L1 learners, the L2 learners named things, talked about people doing things to objects; they talked about the recurrence and disappearance of objects; they called the attention of others to what they saw and heard and did. Some examples of their utterances in these and other categories of relations are shown in Table 1. However, there was a difference in the sequence of emergence of the encoding of these relations in L1 and L2 speech. Indeed, there appeared to be no sequence in their emergence in Kenny and Greg's L2 speech.

Whereas it has been observed that L1 learners begin by encoding a few semantic-syntactic relations productively and then adding new ones, Kenny and Greg encoded a larger number of relations in their earliest sentences. The changes in frequency over time reflected not the addition of new categories, but shifts in proportional frequency in which first one and then another category increased or decreased according to the aspects of the situation on which the child focused. That is, the frequency with which various relations were expressed depended less on what these young L2 learners knew how to say than on what they wanted to say.

Table 1

Semantic Relations Encoded in Early French L2 Sentences

Existence

ça c'est un cheval
le lapin
un bébé

Recurrence

ça aussi
voilà un autre cochon
l'autre roue

Negation

moi pas jouer
pas là
pas moi

Action

moi fais
moi jouer avec le train
le lion mange les girafes

Locative Action

ca va là
mettre ça ici
moi va à la piscine

Locative State

trois bébés est là
mon frère ici
où il est le méchant

Attribution

ça c'est brun
le papa-vache
mon petit bébé

Notice

regarde-moi
regarde ça
regarde qu' est-ce que moi faire
regarde à moi

Wh- Question

qu'est-ce que c'est
qui est ça
où il est le sac
qui mettre ça là

Manner

faire ça comme ça
oui c'est bon

Intensifier

c'est très gros
ça va trop vite

Conjunction

ça pis (puis) ça
mon maman et papa

Possession

moi boîte
la maison de moi
mon maman est une docteur

In their earliest sentences, Kenny and Greg talked about many different things, in the sense that they encoded a large number of different semantic relations productively. Overall, they were talking about the same things as the L1 learners, but for the L2 learners there was no clear pattern of emergence of new semantic relations over time. Furthermore, some relations were always far more frequent in the speech of the L2 learners than in that of the L1 learners. For example, the frequency of attributive relations was higher in L2 than in L1 speech. Utterances encoding naming relations had consistently high frequency for the L2 learners, whereas naming relations decreased in proportional frequency over time for the L1 learners as verb relations increased. The high frequency of existence (naming) and attributive relations corresponded to the finding by Felix (1975) that "copular sentences" were frequent in the early German L2 speech of English L1 children. Further, categories which were not yet productive in the L1 learners' speech at MLU 2.5 were frequent in the L2 learners' speech at MLU 2.5 or less, for example, conjunction and adverbs of manner. In Table 2, the proportion of the multi-word relations accounted for by each category of relations is shown for each sample.

The L2 learners achieved considerable variety in the meanings encoded in their early sentences by the frequent use of pro-forms. They used more pronouns than French L1 learners at similar MLU and vocabulary levels. They also used pro-verbs, pro-locatives, indeed, even pro-sentences. This phenomenon has also been described by other researchers (Felix, 1975; Huang, 1970; Wagner-Gough and Hatch, 1975). The use of pro-forms was similar to language behavior Hakuta (1975) has called "pre-fabricated routines." Some were purely memorized routines borrowed <u>in toto</u> like the whole sentence "qu'est-ce que c'est." Others were smaller units, for example, "ça c'est" (this, it's) used as if it meant "ça" in sentences such as "ça c'est va là" (this it's goes there).

Table 2

Proportion of Semantic-Syntactic Relations

Accounted for by Each Category in Each Sample

	Kenny							Greg			
	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI	XII	XIII	II	III	IV	V
Existence	.21	.18	.14	.09	.13	.08	.09	.27	.13	.08	.18
Recurrence	.03	.05	.01			.04	.04	.05	.10	.04	.10
Negation	.07	.14	.10	.06	.11	.10	.11	.05	.06	.11	.08
Action	.04	.09	.10	.07	.06	.10	.10	.06	.03	.07	.03
Locative Action	.03	.01		.12		.01	.04		.10	.05	.14
Locative State	.08	.03	.04	.10	.15	.05	.08	.02	.02	.05	.05
State [a]		.02			.01		.01		.01	.01	.01
Notice Intention [a]			.02	.03	.10	.05	.03	.02	.04	.03	.01
Attribution	.23	.21	.27	.13	.11	.24	.19	.19	.11	.08	.09
Possession		.02	.03	.04	.06	.01	.03	.01	.01	.02	-
11 Categories	.71	.74	.73	.64	.72	.69	.72	.66	.60	.53	.69
Wh question	.06	.05	.08	.12	.07	.07	.07	.03	.07	.07	.06
Place				.04	.01		.02	.09			.01
Dative			.03		.03		.02				
Conjunction	.03	.08	.06	.04	.03	.04	.01	.06	.15	.07	.04
Stereotype	.11	.03	.03	.04	.01	.03	.01		.01	.02	
Other [b]	.05	.07	.08	.04	.09	.09	.10	.15	.11	.23	.13
Equivocal		.01		.01			.01			.07	.02
Undetermined	.04	.02	-	.06	.04	.05	.02		.03	.02	.01
Number relations in sample	177	199	143	69	72	203	179	148	174	358	254

Note. Roman numerals indicate the number of the sample described. In terms of chronological age, time of exposure to the second language, MLU, and other indices, Kenny VII-XIII and Greg II-V correspond to the same developmental period.

[a] Included here for purposes of comparison with previous research.

[b] Includes adverbs of manner and time, intensifiers, dative, and other relations.

Because of their cognitive maturity relative to L1 learners with similar MLU and vocabulary, the L2 learners sought to talk about more different things in their earliest sentences. They were not greatly inhibited by problems of linguistic complexity in the L2. They simply borrowed forms learned for other uses and used them to express a wider variety of semantic relations than L1 learners with similar linguistic skills (in terms of MLU and vocabulary).

The role of frequency of the encoding of certain relations in the input speech cannot be adequately studied with the available data. It seems, however, that the children's development of semantic-syntactic relations would not be determined by the input in terms of meaning, although the forms acquired for expressing these meanings would be more directly determined by the input.

In this study of early L2 speech a framework developed in L1 research has provided a framework for the analysis of L2 speech, considering both form and meaning in data analysis. The data obtained in this study are rich and the analysis reported here is only one aspect of a continuing longitudinal study. Future reports will be concerned with, among other topics, the development of the form and function of questions, vocabulary growth, indices of linguistic development, and comparisons of spontaneous and elicited speech production.

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